

Greening Faith: Vermont Interfaith Power and Light

Environmental Studies Senior Seminar
Middlebury College
Professor Gould, Professor Ashcraft, Diane Munroe
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Sara Bachman, Juliana Kay, Miriam Nielsen, Leslie Reed, Mollie Young

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Introduction

This project took place over a twelve-week period in the Fall of 2013 as part of the Middlebury College Environmental Studies Senior Seminar (ES 401), a capstone course for all Environmental Studies majors. Professor Gould, Professor Ashcraft, and Diane Munroe led ES 401 with the theme, “Imagining Vermont’s Environmental Future.” Our group of five Environmental Studies students brought varying skill sets and knowledge from each of our different academic foci; Sara Bachman studies Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment; Juliana Kay studies Geography; Miriam Neilsen studies Creative Arts; Leslie Reed studies Conservation Biology; and Mollie Young studies Environmental Policy.

Our overarching ES 401 community partners were Elizabeth Courtney, Co-author of *Greening Vermont: The Search for a Sustainable State*; Victor Guadagno, President and Producer at Bright Blue EcoMedia; and Gregory Sharrow, co-director of the Vermont Folklife Center. These three “umbrella” partners encouraged our class to research and share the work that is happening across the state within the environmental movement, with the goal of communicating these stories to a broader audience to both inspire and strengthen the movement. These partners will provide the space and expertise to share our videos, map, and findings at the Vermont Folklife Center, and as part of an online project being created by Bright Blue EcoMedia and Elizabeth Courtney.

Our specific case partner for this community-based project was Vermont Interfaith Power and Light (VTIPL), an organization dedicated to facilitating discussion and action on climate change in spiritual and religious communities. We worked closely with Betsy Hardy, the Coordinator of VTIPL, and Sam Swanson, the President of the organization. Our

work sought to provide VTIPL with video content, a map, and survey results to help expand their efforts and outreach.

The Research and Planning Process

The first six weeks of our project provided us with a narrative about broader movements and stories of individuals working to increase resilience in the face of a changing climate. We began by reading sections of *Greening Vermont* and looking at literature from Wendell Berry, Rachel Carson, Garrett Hardin, and Amy Seidl. These texts helped ground our thoughts about resilient and adaptive systems, and began our discussion of how these concepts are used by communities and individuals in Vermont. Our team delved into the work of religious and environmental scholars to understand how these fields inform each other. We used works by authors such as Stephanie Kaza, Sallie McFague, Richard Foltz, Rebecca Kneale Gould, Thomas Berry and others to understand the richness and complexities of how religious traditions motivate and ground environmental action and awareness. We found a unique strength within religious and spiritual communities to motivate and implement change, as they serve as ethical backings for the work, provide community support, and offer a space for hope and reflection. We found it necessary to highlight stories of how religious and spiritual organizations are taking part in the environmental movement. The prevalence of people of faith working within the environmental movement is often not recognized; in fact, religious groups are often viewed as being in opposition to earth care and environmental action. However, we found that the stories of religious communities and the voices of these individuals are integral as we plan for our environmental future.

In the first month of semester, we met with VTIPL and our community partners to establish project goals, a process timeline, and understand the needs and wishes of each partner; our partners provided us with information that guided our work. Elizabeth Courtney expressed the desire to continue to share Vermont's environmental success stories and leadership through a range of media. Greg Sharrow provided us with guidelines for how to conduct effective and engaging interviews. After our meeting with Vic Guadagno, we had a better sense of the basics of video production as well as how to best capture interviews on film. Lastly, our meetings with Sam Swanson and Betsy Hardy were important in furthering our understanding of how we could best support Vermont Interfaith Power and Light. Betsy and Sam expressed the desire for help in both sharing and spreading the work of VTIPL, and in connecting with member organizations to provide information and gain feedback. They were specifically interested in having video content to share on their website; a map to show locations of member congregations from various faiths all across the state; and information about what steps member congregations were taking to both conserve energy and spread awareness about environmental issues. They also sought feedback on how VTIPL could improve its services and increase its efficacy. These meetings influenced our decision to create a promotional video for VTIPL, exploring the broader connection between religious traditions and environmental action. We also decided to create two maps – one that illustrated where each of the member congregations are located, and one that showed the diverse faiths represented within the organization from all across the state. We also planned to generate an analysis of survey responses.

The Interview Process

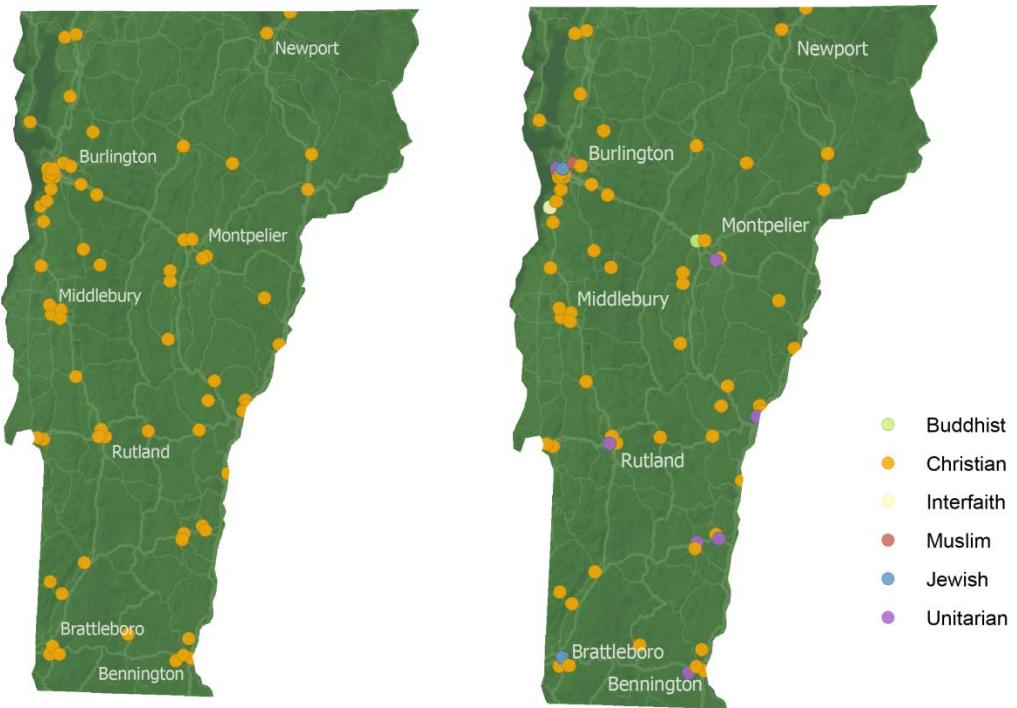
Following these meetings and our initial research, we looked at a contact list of member congregations and affiliated individuals to decide whom to interview. We tried to incorporate people from as many different faiths as possible, and we chose individuals that have played, or still do play, a large role either within VTIPL or within the wider eco-religious movement. Some of our interviewees had little awareness of VTIPL, as they are new to their congregations or to the state, but are very active in promoting environmental awareness within their congregation. We wanted to gather their opinions about the work that VTIPL has done for their congregation, as well as their thoughts on different aspects of the intersection of religion and the environment, including questions such as: "What do you think it is about religious/spiritual traditions that motivate people to act on climate change?" We interviewed nine people: Pastor Nancy Wright of Ascension Lutheran Church in South Burlington; Rabbi Jan Salzman of Ohavi Zedek Synagogue in Burlington; Professor Rebecca Kneale Gould of Middlebury College; Bishop Thomas Ely, the Episcopal Bishop of Vermont; Sister Gail Worcelo, Sister Bernadette Bostwick, and Sister Amie Hendani of the Green Mountain Monastery in Greensboro; Betsy Hardy the coordinator of VTIPL; and Ruah Swennerfelt of the Burlington Friends Meeting of Quakers. We had planned to interview representatives from the Muslim and Buddhist communities within VTIPL, but we were unable to schedule time with them. This is one area in which we suggest improvement and further work; we hope in the future these voices can be gathered and shared within the VTIPL media forum.

After conducting the interviews using audio and film, we transcribed each one. First, we selected quotes that accurately highlight the services that VTIPL has to offer, and the

benefit of the organization to the state, to be used in the “VTIPL Promotional Video.” For our longer video, entitled “Greening Faith,” we compiled quotes that explain and highlight the intersection of spirituality and environmentalism, the specific traditions of certain religions that encourage earth care, and the important role faith communities play in providing hope in the face of climate change. In addition, we found that we had a number of great stories that were either too long for the video or did not quite fit thematically, so we decided to make additional short anecdotal videos to highlight these powerful stories or quotes. All of these videos will be available to VTIPL, Bright Blue EcoMedia, and the Vermont Folklife Center, as well as on the public YouTube channel we created for Vermont Interfaith Power and Light: <http://www.youtube.com/user/VTInterfaith>. We provided Betsy Hardy with the login information and so she can edit the page or share the link to the page as much as she sees fit.

Maps

The maps were created using Google Earth, ArcGIS, and Adobe Illustrator, and they display the member congregations that are listed on VTIPL’s website (as of December 2013). We searched for the location of each congregation listed on Google Earth and saved all the points on the map as a .kml file. We then imported this file into ArcGIS. We combined the location data with an attribute table created in Excel that categorized each congregation by broader denomination (Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Muslim, Unitarian, Interfaith). While one map uses one color for all congregations, to merely show the breadth of VTIPL’s impact across the state, the other map uses a different color for each of the six faith denominations, to show the diversity of membership.



Survey

We created the survey using Google, and sent it via email to 80 member congregations and affiliated individuals, using a contact list that Betsy provided. We received roughly 20 responses. The survey data were analyzed and explained in a written report. The survey included logistical questions about when a congregation became a member of VTIPL, which services are useful and utilized, and which services VTIPL could improve. Our findings led us to recommend ways that VTIPL could be a more useful entity across the state. We learned that many member congregations do not know the extent of the services that the organization provides, meaning that VTIPL needs to find more effective ways to communicate their services. There is a desire among member congregations to have VTIPL provide access to guest speakers, like Bill McKibben or Betsy Hardy, who speak about climate issues at worship services. Eight respondents indicated

that they have received an energy assessment from VTIPL, six respondents have received an energy assessment from another organization, and seven respondents indicated that their congregation has never received an energy assessment. This shows us that although congregations are using the services provided by VTIPL or taking steps to conserve energy through other organizations, there are many member congregations that could still take advantage of VTIPL's baseline offerings.

Another trend that was apparent in the survey results is that oftentimes, respondents indicated that the reason their congregation was not actively involved with VTIPL, did not take advantage of its services, or did not have a prominent environmental group or "green team" promoting energy conservation, is because their congregation is very small or in more rural regions of Vermont. This led us to recommend that VTIPL organize member congregations in groups, based on proximity, throughout the state, so that smaller congregations could be empowered to make energy efficient changes and become more involved participants in the environmental movement.

Lastly, one recommendation involves the newsletter. It was clear from responses that members very much value the newsletter – it is a source of information and inspiration about what other congregations are doing and what upcoming events VTIPL is hosting. Our recommendation would be to "spotlight" certain individuals or member congregations, and write a profile piece of what they are doing to conserve energy and spread awareness about environmental issues. Although it would be more time consuming, we think the newsletter could benefit with better formatting and the use of pictures. Perhaps a PDF uploaded to the website and sent out to member congregations via email would be best. The survey respondents also provided updated contact information for

where the newsletter should be sent. It may be beneficial to encourage recipients of the newsletter to forward it along to other members of their congregation who are also interested in climate issues.

Presentation

Our work culminated with a presentation in front of our peers, professors, community partners, and guests that were involved in our project. This presentation included a screening of our promotional video and two of our anecdotal clips, as well as an explanation of why we conducted this work and what we discovered. It is our hope that this report and our products will reach a further audience with more time and effort. VTIPL is one of many important organizations in the environmental movement in Vermont. It provides important energy-conscious services, and motivates spiritual and religious communities to act to address climate change. We also hope our work will help bring VTIPL closer to other environmental efforts in the state.

Group Reflection

When we reflected on this project as a group, we all came to similar conclusions about what we learned from our research and our project. Our work benefitted from the fact that all five of us come from different backgrounds within Environmental Studies; our various skill sets enriched our group by providing multiple perspectives from which to view a problem or an achievement.

For most of us, this project made us aware of a side of the environmental movement that we did not know existed. We were unaware of the eco-religious movement, but now

understand the power it has in spreading awareness about climate issues and motivating environmental action. In our interviews, we heard perspectives about climate change and environmental action that we had never encountered before. The way the interviewees described their connection with nature and the connection between environmental action and religious tradition was profound and thoughtful—they were speaking from the heart. We were surprised that we found this type of rhetoric much less “preachy” and much more profound than most other environmental leaders and activists. For Sara, who studies Religion, Philosophy, and the Environment, the project grounded her field of academia to individuals and congregations working in Vermont, and was a perfect capstone to her experience. Similarly, this project linked the two foci of Miriam’s major: Environmental Studies and Film, Media and Culture. The project gave her the opportunity to expand on her knowledge as a video-maker by providing a forum for additional practice at some of her weaker technical skills, but also gave her the chance to work with the rest of the group, who is not well versed in movie-making.

Our group was moved and inspired by each and every one of the interviews we held. We were interested to hear how people connected with nature on a personal level, but also how they view the link between religious traditions and environmental action, and how they envision Vermont’s environmental future. Although all of our interviewees provided us with different anecdotes and religious fables, we sensed that they are all passionate about climate change and how it connects to their spiritual beliefs. The interviews provided us with the positive voices and messages coming from religious communities, and enabled us to consider environmental issues in a more meaningful way.

Overall, the project opened up our eyes to the power of organizations and communities in motivating people to act. One of the reasons that VTIPL is effective is because it is building off of pre-existing social capital and structures—congregations and faith communities—to spread its message. Throughout the 12 weeks, we asked ourselves many questions about what VTIPL does and how it could improve its services based on the feedback we received both from the interviews and from the survey. We wondered if putting a price on membership would deter congregations from joining, or if the entry fee would be a good way for VTIPL to gather funds to both improve and increase its services. It is clear that VTIPL does incredible work for the state of Vermont; when member congregations and other religious organizations better understand their services, they will be eager to partake and fully participate.

This project had a tremendous impact on our group. Our goal was very clear and tangible—we worked hard throughout the semester to create materials for VTIPL to spread their mission and attract more members. We were inspired by the stories we heard and the people we met. We are very proud of our work, and feel a deep sense of gratification knowing that we created something that is not only worth sharing, but will have an impact on the future of Vermont.

Conclusion

It is clear from our research that religious and spiritual communities can have an important positive impact on Vermont's environmental future by providing momentum and hope to the otherwise politically-charged and often disheartened environmental movement. Religious and spiritual communities represent a unique voice in the

environmental movement as many of their actions are inspired by traditions that date back thousands of years. The environmental movement in Vermont tends to focus more on mobilizing people through external motivations: financial incentives, concern for the state's rural idyll, and stories and examples of natural disasters such as Tropical Storm Irene. The work of VTIPL and other eco-spiritual leaders, is important because it offers a way of bringing people into the environment through internal core beliefs, which for some may turn out to be more personal and a greater incentive than external motivations. By sharing the voices of VTIPL members alongside the voices highlighted in the other ES 401 projects, we hope to bring together varying perspectives on Vermont's environmental future to show how we can all step forward to help build a resilient and adaptable state.